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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION IN CONTEXT

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The Social Construction of Reality by Berger and Luckmann is one of the most cited sociological books of the past twenty-five years. Its title is, undoubtedly, one of their outstanding achievements. Its contents, however, while brilliantly written, have possibly never been really understood. Some have said, rather maliciously, that the book sold so well because many engineers (mistakenly) bought it. Unfortunately, I may add, of the many sociologists who bought or cited the book only a few have studied it.

The book was published in German at S. Fischer in 1970, opening the new series "Conditio Humana," and was introduced by the great Helmuth Plessner. Interestingly enough, it was not reviewed by the renowned *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*. Otherwise it was well received. Book reviewers commended the new, non-ideological approach, praised the low price, and expressed amazement that an American original was published in German within only three (actually four) years. Although the sociology of knowledge used to be a pet theme of German readers (as Plessner notes in the introduction), *Social Construction* did not have an easy time of it. When structural functionalism and quantitative sociology--both imported from the United States after World War II--confronted growing criticism in the sixties, the Frankfurt school and neo-Marxism reaped the benefit. Then, after Habermas entered into a well-publicized debate with Niklas Luhmann (who defended a functionalist systems theory blending Parsonian and phenomenological concepts), the two became the most cited and quoted German sociologists of the period.

Nonetheless, a growing group of sociologists sought a closer and more adequate approach to social reality than these highly-abstract general theories allowed. To these people, *Social Construction* beckoned the way to symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, socio-linguistics, and other facets of the "interpretive paradigm." This is how I came to study these approaches as a graduate student in the early seventies.

What struck me most were the theses that reality is socially constructed and that sociology has to study the ways in which this is done. The book resurrected Alfred Schutz' phenomenological analysis of the life-world, used it to clarify basic sociological concepts like role and institution, and offered a new synthesis not only of Weber and Durkheim, but also of Mead and philosophical anthropology (Gehlen and Plessner). Berger and Luckmann's explication of the media through which social order is objectified--typification, signs, symbols, habitualization, and so on--rendered deep insights into the richness of human interaction. Their analysis of the relationship between social institutions and the symbolic worlds of meaning (*Sinnwelten*) which legitimize them proved once and for all that conventional sociological jargon about the "logic of institutions" obscured the actual processes through which institutions become social realities. They presented a sociological theory which conceived of social

actors as competent humans, evaded sociological reifications, and abjured the widespread arrogance of social scientists (who at the time loved to talk of "false consciousness" and Freudian "unconscious constraints," properly identified, of course, by themselves). But above all, they made clear how naive an objectivist stance towards social reality is. Put simply: The *how* of social phenomena has to be explicated before we can attend to the *what* and the *why*.

Undoubtedly, the book had its shortcomings. The main one, in my view, was the exclusion of epistemological and methodological discussions (which tactically, I admit, may have been a good move). Why should sociologists care about subjective meaning, given their concern with social actions and social facts? For sake of reliability, should they not limit themselves to external, observable behavior? Schutz agreed that methodological considerations limit the extent and ways in which sociologists can explore subjective experience. Sociological and phenomenological analyses have different purposes even when they focus on the same phenomenon. In *Structures of the Life-World*, Schutz and Luckmann offer fine-grained descriptions of the formal meaning structures of everyday life. Phenomenologists trust that these structures can be explicated by the reflexive analyses of intentionality. Phenomenological analysis, however, is *proto-sociological*. Thus a division of labor is struck: The meaning structures of the life-world form, on an *epistemological* level, a frame in which the *hermeneutic task* of sociological analysis inevitably has to be pursued. How interpretation is conducted is indeed a methodological question within the finite province of meaning of sociology. But the sociological preoccupation with sociality, understanding and intention arises not from a preference of one "method" over another, but from the intersubjective nature of the lifeworld itself.

Seen from Europe, the portrait of "phenomenological sociology" in American textbooks was often crude caricature. The twenty-fifth anniversary of *Social Construction* provides the opportunity to redress this impression. If the arguments in the book sometimes seem to be written a little too elegantly, and if you are bothered by the loose definition of some central concepts, you can find detailed specifications in *Structures of the Life-World*. Even if you are skeptical about the possibility of phenomenological analysis, you will not find another book which explicates human experience, knowledge and action, and the interrelatedness of subjective and intersubjective knowledge in richer detail. If you consider that a discipline like cognitive anthropology moved from the linguistic analysis of terms to the investigation of idioms and is now slowly arriving at the notion of cultural knowledge and its complex relation to action, you recognize how far ahead Berger and Luckmann were twenty-five years ago.

What are the prospects for a phenomenologically oriented sociology in Germany today? It is evident that phenomenology has vastly spread in the past two decades. Phenomenological concepts are found throughout the different fields of sociology. The grand theorists Habermas and Luhmann have incorporated phenomenological concepts as central elements. German rational choice theorists are attempting to integrate Schutz' work on "choosing among projects of action" into their approach as well (e.g. Hartmut Esser).¹ As for the institutionalization of phenomenology, two facts are worth

noting: The German Research Foundation recently acquired Schutz' private library for the Schutz Archive at the University of Constance, and the prestigious publisher Suhrkamp at Frankfurt is planning a new, all-inclusive edition of Schutz' writings.

Finally, a lively research tradition is under way. A group of phenomenologically oriented sociologists, favoring empirical analyses of concrete social interaction, publishes regularly at prominent publishers (Suhrkamp, Fink). In analyzing what Berger and Luckmann called the "conversational apparatus" in which a common sense of reality is constructed as an ongoing accomplishment in face-to-face situations, they borrow widely from ethnomethodology, ethnography, conversation analysis, symbolic interactionism, cognitive anthropology, and other specialties. By investigating the processes of reality construction locally and in situ, they complement the general level of analysis in *Social Construction* and materialize what had been Berger and Luckmann's goal from the outset: to found an empirical sociology of knowledge.

Endnote

¹ Hartmut Esser's essay, "The Rationality of Everyday Behavior: A 'Rational Choice' Reconstruction of the Theory of Action of Alfred Schütz," will appear in the October issue of *Rationality and Society*—ed.

RECONSTRUCTION INSTEAD OF
CONSTRUCTIVISM:
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF *THE SOCIAL
CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY*¹

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Translated by Mara Luckmann

It would "certainly not amount to the same thing" had the authors called their book "The Construction of Social Reality" instead of *The Social Construction of Reality*. Thus begins Helmuth Plessner's introduction to the German edition published in 1970. This comment may bear even greater importance today than it did twenty-five years ago.

Then the Parsonians were adjudicating the theoretical debates, while empirical social research, in the guise of mathematized scholasticism, was waxing enthusiastic over ever more artful statistical models. At the same time, in almost all 'western' industrial countries, old social utopias had formed an alliance with a new search for collectively-binding meaning. Some younger (as well as a few older) sociologists submerged themselves in the new movements. A new pillar-of-fire sociology came into being which attempted to show the nations in the desert the true path. And it tried to protect itself from error by acquiring the label 'critical.' For sociology, it was a restless but nonetheless fertile period in which new and old currents met.

[Soeffner recounts the state of academic sociology in West Germany from WWII to the 1960s, mentioning the reverse emigration of Adorno, Horkheimer and Bloch, the debate between Habermas and Popper, and the belated rediscovery of Norbert Elias. He traces Berger and Luckmann's conception of a sociology of knowledge "cleansed of all

ideological baggage" back to Weber's *verstehende soziologie* and Schütz' analyses of intersubjectivity, symbol, sign, and life-world.]

What these analyses revealed was the 'relative-natural world view' (Scheler) which constitutes our everyday reality, on whose seemingly secure foundation our everyday actions occur in a meaningful, but also pre-theoretical way. The ultimate target of this search for the 'foundations of knowledge in everyday life' was the central object of the social sciences: the constitution of what we call 'the societal,' its phenomena, its structural forms, and its processes of 'implementation' and articulation.

[While Schütz had already assimilated the pragmatist ideas of multiple realities (James) and the multiplicity of perspectives (Dewey, Mead) into his "proto-sociology," Berger and Luckmann transferred this whole project into the sociology of knowledge, giving the theory of institutions a micro-foundation in the process.] The result: a sociology of knowledge from the perspective of constitution-analysis.

This sociology describes the human way of approaching the world, the genesis and transmission as well as the changes in our knowledge of the world from the perspective of subjectivity. It describes the formation of the social 'identity of individuals' within the framework of an imposed 'societization' and a socio-historical apriority. Above all, the intention is to show how our everyday reality and our everyday actions are determined by institutions, products, world views, collective 'mentalities,' behavior patterns, and forms of knowledge. All of these arise from human action, and in turn have a retroactive effect upon human action.

The analysis regards itself as the *reconstruction of the social construction of reality*. It shows how social worlds are created by their denizens, and the conditions social worlds impose upon them in turn. It is neither the reproduction of a system which processes new 'inputs' according to old-established patterns, nor a demonstration of how the countless cogwheels of a social mechanism intersect. Instead, we are shown *how* societies produce what they claim to know and thus the 'worlds' they inhabit. Thus equipped, we may turn to the concrete historic materials and forms without speculative filter.

Applying such a method of constitution-analysis is like applying a laxative to all forms of speculation or prophecy. In this respect, *Social Construction* is a disappointment, in spite of its irrefutable success, to all those who expect sociology to present cosmic blueprints or a 'world-theory' (Luhmann). For it leaves no room for a sociology that provides meaning nor yet for its twin, a sociology that unmasks meaning. The aim is simply the reconstruction of social constructions--the description, interpretation, and understanding of understanding itself in a world which always comes to us pre-interpreted.

[For a contemporary example of the quest for metaphysical truths in sociology, Soeffner cites "the recently-formed love match" between Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and "radical constructionism," while partially exempting Karin Knorr-Cetina's "solid empirical reconstructions of constructions."] This colorful congregation meets under the sign of the trinity of 'system, construction, and auto-poiesis' --a unity which can only be held together with the greatest of